"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

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One frequently hears references to the term community and Christian community. In rural circles the reference is commonplace, but, what does the phrase mean; can we describe it? It would be foolish to infer that we can give any final answer. But, if we are to continue to use the phrase we should continue to probe its meaning.

The late Dr. Thomas A. Tripp discerningly pointed out two uses of the word community. One is common among these with those influenced by rural sociology. The second is used by theologians.

Many sociologists think of the community as a spacial arrangement of population whose chief common factor is juxtaposition. "The spatial community is most nearly described as it exists in rural communities. Rural people belong to local organizations together. They often see each other face-to-face. They may help one another. They may work together. Through personal acquaintance, common knowledge, gossip and hearsay, they know each other as neighbors. The church and other institutions are located in the sociological community. Their attitudes toward each other are based upon mutual contacts."

By the term community the theologians mean a fellowship between Christians. It is the faith that Christians hold as Christians and the bonds of comradeship between them that give Christians a sense of what is called community. "Christianity is a community of common interest regardless of the sociological or spatial residence of the faithful." So it is said there is a world Christian community.

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The two concepts of community seem to be mutually exclusive. One emphasizes a mutuality of faith among people regardless of their location. The other gives emphasis to the spatial arrangement of people in a locality. The sociologists think that the theologian would better use the world fellowship or comradeship to describe the mutual relationships in the larger Christian enterprise. He would like to see the word "community" reserved to designate a locality group. But, the theologians are not as amenable to such concessions as the sociologists might wish. Before parting company with the theologian the ruralist should look into some of the implications of the theologian's use of the term community. It might lead to a better definition of the local Christian community.

What is Community?

The factors which make a rural community have often been described. First, it takes people. The community idea embraces all the people of an area, the families with the new born and the aged, the cooperators and joiners and the non-cooperators, the hale and the sick, the educated and the uneducated. One usually thinks first of people when one thinks of community.

Second, one is likely to think of land. What is the area in which people making up the community live? What are the boundaries and how far does it run east, west, north and south of a given point? While the area is not always absolutely delineated, it is usually clear in the minds of those who live in the specific community.

A third factor is the relationship between people. These relationships are intimate such as occur in families, informal as occur when friends meet in work, play or incidentally. The relationships are also formal as take place in the agencies, organizations and institutions of a community. These relations are well established and significant and give the institutions pronounced characteristics. The institutions are in reality relationships that have been formalized.

A fourth factor is an intangible one which can be called spirit. People say that a community has a community spirit or it does not have. This spirit seems to consist of a combination of customs, traditions, attitudes, a scale of values, ideals, and characteristics of persons and the environment.

This definition in general is agreed to by many. The people who live at a center and in the surrounding area as individuals, and in relationship with one another and to the land make a community.

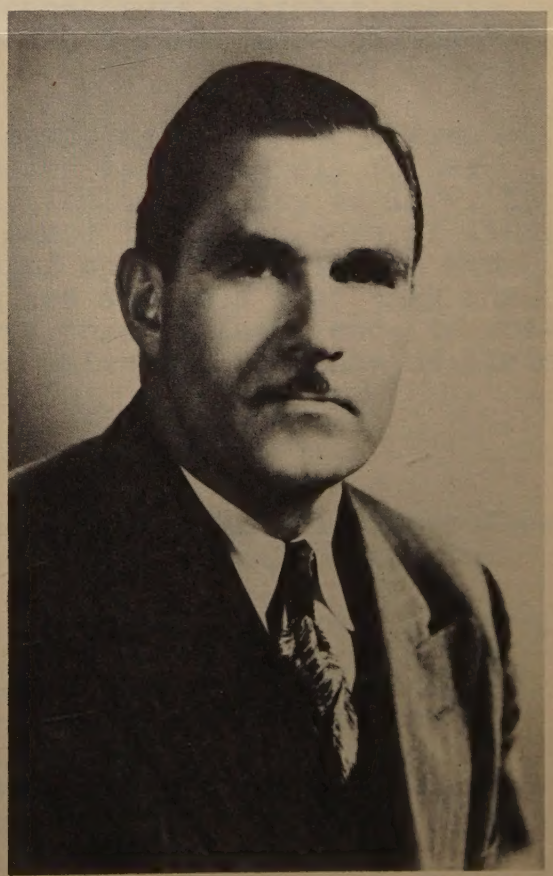
Theologians have not shown wide interest in this type of community, though their emphasis on "Christian community" is applicable. We shall turn to a somewhat neglected nineteenth century theologian,

Bishop N.F.S. Grundtvig of Denmark for direction. In the course of his studies of Danish folk lore, history, philosophy, poetry and prose literature and customs, Grundtvig came to believe greatly in something he called Danishness. All these things which had grown up in the native soil of Denmark formed a whole, something distinct and different than existed anywhere else. It made Denmark a distinctive nation with a special character. This is called a National idea.

Community as Person

All these forces operating in proximity under special conditions gives the community a distinct entity. With reservation it can be said that the community has personality. The community does have a special identity. Griscom Morgan of Yellow Springs, Ohio has said that the community "to the degree that it is a real community and not merely a group of people--has a being and spirit that lives in itself, although not apart from its members."[1]

At first thought this seems incredible. Yet, in our every day affairs we do ascribe personality to communities. One community is known as open-minded and cooperative. Another community is censorious, narrow, recriminatory and bigoted. One community is generous-spirited and outgoing while a near-by community is self-centered and selfish. A community may be joyous and optimistic or it may take on the characteristics of pessimism and gloominess. One community is progressive and another is reactionary. We recognize these qual ities in our every-day judgments when we say, "That community is too self-satisfied," or when we say "I would like to live in that community, it is so friendly."



There may be objection to the idea that a community has distinct entity or personality. There are opposing parts and facts in all communities. No community is completely progressive, it is also reactionary. A community generally slow to anger may have in it inflamatory elements. A community of law abiding citizens can harbor renegades. The elements which give character and entity to a community are never completely harmonized; sometimes they are almost at war with one another.

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[1] THE COMMUNITY AS PERSONS, Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin #157, Nov., 1950.